

Pat Davis

Legacy Program Preserves Post's History

Stilwell House, Commanding Officer Quarters designed by Alfred Giles.

Michael Hilger, post historical architect, examines the damage to the interior of the main band building. The 700° heat peeled 13 layers of lead paint from the walls and woodwork. A new seamed roof was added to the structure to protect future interior repairs.

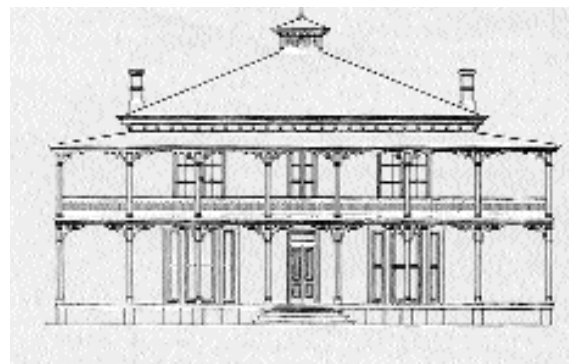


Fort Sam Houston is unique even among historic Army posts. What makes it especially unique is the fact that more than 900 of the buildings on post are either on the National Register of Historic Places or qualified for placement on it. That makes the installation a repository of living history that exceeds even colonial Williamsburg in magnitude.

The refurbishing effort currently underway on historic old Infantry Post—part of the installation's Legacy demonstration project—stimulated considerable interest among local and state conservation and historical organizations. The climate of cooperation that developed between the post and these organizations resulted in the adoption of a programmatic agreement involving the post, the Department of the Army, the city of San Antonio, the Texas Historic Commission, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the San Antonio Conservation Society, and the Society for the Preservation of Historic Fort Sam Houston.

The end result was a demonstration project that has grown into a full-fledged prototype program involving other governmental agencies.

Classes are being taught to senior staff members of government agencies in leadership roles. Artisans are being trained in an apprenticeship program, in conjunction with the National Park Service. The post's historical architect is providing expertise in preservation techniques, ensuring that everything is researched in meticulous detail.



Architectural styles and old paint colors are being copied—with the notable exception of the use of lead paint and the tools and materials of yesteryear. Unfortunately, those can only be approximated.

Ross Hunt, a master stonemason with the National Park Service, has even developed a tool to finish the mortar in the style of the 1800s. The most minute detail—such as finding the source of the sand from which the mortar was made—is studied and duplicated. In the areas where modern work and materials are used, Hunt has left definitive indicators where the original construction left off and the reconstruction began. In fact, you could say he has left no stone unturned in ensuring that future generations can differentiate between the original historic edifice and the more modern rehabilitation project.

Architect Michael Hilger follows these same stringent preservation procedures in working with the wood, glass, iron, and paint of the buildings. He demonstrated one technique used in the lath plastering job in the Stilwell house, which incorporates the use of goat hair mixed with the plaster to keep the plaster from cracking and dropping.

Hilger also plans the placement of various rooms in a functional configuration, in preparing for the future tenant's reuse of the completed buildings. His techniques employ both the artistic and the functional in all aspects of the building, as well as maintaining the historical integrity of each undertaking.

In addition, the Directorate of Public Works (DPW), for whom Hilger works, has contracted with the University of Illinois Graduate School of Architecture to develop a study of Fort Sam Houston's historic landscape planning. The study also will include executing a landscape plan that will employ plants in use on military posts of the era. These will be organized into xeriscapes that use native plants that require minimal watering.

Among Hilger's considerations in revitalizing the area is incorporating an old "trick-of-the-trade" in using the prevailing wind in a form of cross-ventilation. It seems post engineers in the early days kept the greensward of a parade field open in

front of the housing area, to allow the unrestricted breeze to cool the quarters and work areas. In the days before electric fans and air conditioners, builders had to use every means at their disposal to make life tenable on the plains of Texas.

Hilger also will preserve the original wide, covered porches; high ceilings; and full length windows in tact. Early designers used these features as additional means of cooling the housing and work area buildings.

The preservation effort at Fort Sam Houston originally began as a Legacy demonstration project, aimed at stabilizing a rare complex of buildings associated with turn-of-the-century martial music. The old Band Building complex, which includes the practice and mess halls, had been vacant and unused since a fire damaged them in 1980. The state of disrepair initially led installation managers to favor demolition of the buildings.

The installation encompasses a main post of 3,000 acres, containing more than 900 buildings qualified for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. It also has responsibility for Camp Bullis, a huge subordinate installation where the U.S. Army Medical Department Center and School trains more than 38,000 resident students annually. Base realignments and closures, with the subsequent transfer of functions to Fort Sam Houston, expanded both the military mission and the post population at the exact time the installation was experiencing a concurrent loss of funds. This drain on the coffers caused further problems in providing appropriate maintenance.

The installation found itself critically short of maintenance funds, due to cutbacks and increased mission requirements. The available monies, therefore, were applied to activities and facilities having the most critical need. This resulted in a number of additional buildings that began to deteriorate, requiring a high degree of repair.

Fort Sam Houston has enjoyed an especially close relationship with the city of San Antonio, from the arrival of the first U.S. Army unit in 1845 to the

present. The original military fortification was even built on 92 acres of land donated by the city, giving rise to the affectionate nickname by which San Antonio became known, "The mother-in-law of the Army." The pasts of the city and the post are woven together in such a way that they have become indistinguishable, historically.

The installation is a popular tourist site for San Antonio's many convention visitors and tourists. It is now a regular stop for tour buses, with an estimated 1,000 visitors per week. The post's attraction for the general public and its historic significance to the community have combined to make the post an item of prime interest to two non-profit organizations. The San Antonio Conservation Society, and the Society for the Preservation of Historic Fort Sam Houston are raising funds for the preservation of several historic buildings.

In 1990, the Texas Historical Commission recognized the special historical significance of the band building complex. Texas Congressman Henry B. Gonzales became the champion of the project and began to solicit private funding to restore these buildings.

In fiscal year 1992, the installation used \$200,000 in Legacy funds to research the historic context of 12 abandoned buildings located on the old Infantry Post, and to provide subsequent archival and architectural drawings of the buildings. The rehabilitation drawings were done in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior standards, and included construction specifications.

During fiscal year 1993, the project received an additional \$270,000 to provide training for Army managers and artisans in rehabilitating and stabilizing the band building. The hands-on training began in October 1993 and continued through March 1994. The U.S. Army Construction Engineering Research Laboratories (USACERL) served as the proponent for developing the "hands-on" craftsmanship instruction in the procedures for maintenance and stabilization of historic buildings. The NPS Williamsport Training Center served as the prime contractor, providing historical artisans such as carpenters, masons, and painters for training and stabilizing work.

The Legacy project participants—the Society for the Preservation of Historic Fort Sam Houston, the San Antonio Conservation Society, the Texas Historical Commission, and the city of San Antonio—have formed a viable working group in conjunction with the Department of the Army and the installation in funding and overseeing the historical integrity of the area.

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The reconstructed belvedere, atop the new seamed roof, gives the 1880s vintage Band Building a rakish air and a new lease on life. The band sat in the rooftop belvedere and played military marches, as the troops passed in review on the plains below. The new roof was added first, to preserve the interior which was exposed to the elements following the fire.

